

## IN THE WILDS OF THE INTERNET, RESURRECT THE FAIRYTALE HEROINES

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### ABSTRACT

Seemingly innocent narratives, fairy tales are used as a mechanism that expresses and enforces the relations of power in society. These 'simple' stories perpetuate socially acceptable ideologies and behavioral patterns for both sexes. Fairy tales project beauty, meekness, passivity, obedience, and submissiveness as the ideal qualities of women. Fairy tales never encourage girls to be outspoken persons, independent thinkers, and agents of action. Instead, these stories tell only about girls who are sweet and kind. The construction of gender roles using fairy tales has been criticized by feminists across the globe. Nikita Gill, a British Indian writer with a huge online following, in her poetry collection *wild embers*, rewrites many of the fairy tales. The feminine mode of writing takes new dimensions in the relatively new field of digital poetry especially the Instagram poetry. This paper aims at exploring the huge feminine potential in the rewritten fairytale heroines of *The Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Cinderella*, *The Beauty and the Beast* and *Alice in Wonderland*.

**KEYWORDS:** Digital Poetry, Nikita Gill, Rewritten Fairy Tale Heroines, Feminine Mode of Writing

### INTRODUCTION

"Fairytale exist

They always have

We just have to rewrite them

Over and over again

till they fit"

(Gill, 59)

If stories are part of life, no doubt fairy tales are indispensable. Fairytale are hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group and which served to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances.

Such fairy tales have a unique importance as they are verbally and orally transmitted from one generation to the next, in order to establish the sanction for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Along with the wondrous, magical world of fairies, they also imprint on our minds, some stereotypical notions of gendered behaviors.

Seemingly innocent narratives, fairy tales are used as a mechanism that expresses and enforces the relations of power in society. These ‘simple’ stories perpetuate socially acceptable ideologies and behavioral patterns for both sexes. Fairy tales project beauty, meekness, passivity, obedience, and submissiveness as the ideal qualities of women. Boys were taught to be action-takers, leaders and protectors often striding for to either save or find their mysterious princess and take their happily ever after. These tales act as powerful narratives capable of inculcating

Patriarchal values in young minds. Fairy tales never encourage girls to be outspoken persons, independent thinkers, and agents of action. Ellen Rooney quotes Althusser: “The politics of literature are literally the politics of agency and subordination, of the forms of subjectivity that are ceded power and those that reassigned ‘subjection’ in the sense of a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission” (Rooney, 89)

Classical fairy tales which have been around for generations, aim at educating and putting forth ideal behaviors for children both boys and girls. The old cultural expectations are hard to remove since they are inherently contained within the story itself. What we need is new stories and new fairytales which are devoid of such cultural expectations.

Nikita Gill, a British Indian writer, and poet, with a huge online following, rewrite some of the classic fairy tales in her poetry collection *wild embers*. Featuring rewritten fairy tale heroines, goddess wisdom and poetry that burns with revelation, this collection is an explosion of femininity, empowerment and personal growth.

In the classical story of ‘The Sleeping Beauty’, the prince kisses the sleeping beauty and she comes back to life. Gill, in her version of the story, questions the right of the prince to kiss a girl who was unconscious, just because he thinks she is pretty. A girl has all the right to own her body, and no boy has the right to touch her without her consent just because he thinks she is pretty. The gill’s protagonist will not marry the prince. Aurora will stand tall, say ‘no’ to a marriage with a man she barely knows and rules her father’s kingdom all on her. Gill says “The version of Sleeping Beauty I tell my daughter will be a fairytale about consent before it is a fairy tale about true love. In it, I will pause and ask her ‘Do you think it is right for the Prince to kiss a girl who was unconscious, just because he thinks she is pretty?’ And I expect her to say ‘No. No, it is not.’... I will teach her to say the word ‘No’ before she learns ‘Yes’. I will teach her that others may think she is being difficult, but no one’s opinion matters as much as her own. And most important of all, I will teach her never to feel guilty or wear her body as though it is a gift to anyone except herself.” (60)

Most fairy tales project beauty as the primary quality of a girl. All the heroines, fairy tales present before us, are very beautiful. ‘The Beauty and the Beast’ presents beauty as the greatest virtue of its heroine. Her name Belle is a testament to outward beauty. Nikita strongly disagrees with it and says that instead of first being introduced as beautiful, she should be introduced as fierce, kind, independent, intelligent and powerful. “Her name should never have been Belle. Her name should have been Féroce. Her name should have been Liberté” (61)

The much-celebrated story of Cinderella is also rewritten, for the classical fairytale presents before us the image of a tamed, sweet girl. The emotional abuse Cinderella suffers at the hands of her Stepfamily members is obvious. And the story intends to teach girls to be good in spite of whatever might be thrown their way, and always maintain her calm and gracious exterior made of passivity. The new strands Nikita weaves into the story offer a paradigm shift. Cinderella is presented as one who exerts her agency. “Cinderella’s Fairy Godmother wasn’t a fairy Godmother at all. She was the best damn lawyer in town, and she took Cinderella’s stepsisters and stepmother to the cleaners before they

were unceremoniously thrown out of a house that wasn't theirs. At the end of the day, that house was her father's last possession and as its mistress, Cinderella could return it to its former glory and bring back its sunny disposition. She didn't need to worry about balls and glass slippers because she took over her father's business of trading beautifully woven fabric from lands far and wide. When the prince did come to her door, he hand-delivered her invitation, and Cinderella who had to leave for a business trip that very evening told him she had no inclination. She needed no husband at the tender age of 19. She didn't want to become a princess and abandon what she had built, as a royal she would have no time because the girls who were building empires for themselves did not need kingdoms to shine." (66) Gill's Cinderella teaches us that abuse should not be tolerated and we should be agents of action.

In the Little Mermaid fairy tale, the heroine is presented as someone who leaves behind everything she had, even her own identity as a mermaid for the love of a man. But the Gill version projects a very different protagonist. Her heroine uses her voice to empower other mermaids to stand against humans destroying their home. She nurses injured sharks and dolphins and fish back to health. "She wears armor, and with her warrior sisters topples poachers' boats leaving them to fight their own way out of the water. She loves her body as it is and does not resent her fish tail and wish for legs or wish to be a land girl because she recognizes what she was born in was special. She teams up with the sea witch and encourages her to use her magic to aid in her quest to save the ocean, home to both of them" (62). Gill's Little Mermaid, Ariel is remembered for all her hard work for the ocean, not for her blind love.

Nikita has also rewritten the story of Snow White. Her Snow White is a self-made woman, able to confront life in all its ferocity and audacity. She equips herself with the knowledge of self-defense before she sang to the birds or baked apple pie. Gill reminds us, "Don't ever let them tell you that girls are made for glass boxes and princes and apple pies when girls are made for swords and shields and anything else they damn well want to be" (65)

In every classical fairytale, as long as the girl follows what is set out as good behavior, she gets the reward of marriage – and being swept into wealth and status with a person who is practically a stranger.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The rewritten fairy tale heroines of Nikita Gill are totally against these stereotypical notions. They are not presented as meek, submissive, obedient, sweet and beautiful characters. Instead, she presents her heroines as independent, intelligent, smart, outspoken agents of action. These rewritten fairy tales are a genuine deconstruction of masculinity and femininity that seeks to minimize or reduce human biology' capacity to underpin the spuriously fixed and permanent quality of these terms.

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